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# BOOK REVIEW

# L.A. as it might have been

## Think of this look at architectural projects that never came to fruition as a counter-history of the city

DAVID L. ULIN
BOOK CRITIC

**Never Built Los Angeles**
Greg Goldin and Sam Lubell
Foreword by Thom Mayne
Metropolis Books: 376 pp., $55

When, in the 1920s, the pioneering Southern California social critic Louis Adamic called Los Angeles "the enormous village," he didn't mean it as a compliment. Rather, he was referring to L.A.'s insularity, its status as what Richard Meltzer would later label "the biggest HICK Town (per se) in all the hick land," a city of small-town values and narrow vision that "grew up suddenly, planlessly."

For Adamic, the city was defined by individual, as opposed to collective, passions, starting with its architecture. His idea of the place as a "garden city," in which identity was less an expression of the public square than of the private home, has been echoed by nine decades of observers, from Nathanael West ("Only dynamite would be any use," he sniffs in "The Day of the Locust," against L.A.'s "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples") to Norman Mailer, who, in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," grouses about the "pastel monotonies" of this "city without iron, eschewing wood, a kingdom of stucco, the playground for mass men."

A similar sensibility underpins "Never Built Los Angeles," a compendium of more than 100 architectural projects — master plans, skyscrapers, transportation hubs, parks and river walks — that never made it off the ground. Edited by former Los Angeles magazine architecture critic Greg Goldin and Sam Lubell, West Coast editor of the Architect's Newspaper, and accompanied by an exhibition at the Architecture and Design Museum, it's a lavish counter-history of the city as it might have been: a literal L.A. of the mind.

**A BYGONE PROPOSAL** for Grand Avenue consisted of individual projects designed by the likes of Frank Gehry.

"Los Angeles," Goldin and Lubell explain in an insightful introduction, "lacks the grand gestures of urban innovation. Several of the best houses of the twentieth century were conceived and built here, but the same cannot be said of civic buildings or parks or plazas or monuments. With a few notable exceptions — Los Angeles City Hall, Disney Hall, the Bradbury Building, the Department of Water and Power building, Griffith Park Observatory, and Griffith Park itself — a gift for public architecture and planning is missing. These scattered, almost accidental urban triumphs are so singular that they underscore how little has been done, and how little they alone can do, to piece the city together into a compelling whole."

The irony, of course, is that it didn't have to be this way. Beginning with Charles Mulford Robinson's 1907 "City Beautiful Plan" — featuring parks and boulevards around "a new 'administrative center,'" modeled on Daniel Burnham's plan for Chicago and Baron von Haussmann's for Paris — the book traces a century of innovative thinking: some good, some bad.

There's Robert Alexander and Richard Neutra's 1950 Elysian Park Heights development, which would have mixed high-rises and garden apartments to provide housing for more than 3,000 families in a pre-Dodger Stadium Chavez Ravine. Or Lloyd Wright's famous Civic Center plan of 1925, an "acropolis for the city" in the form of terraced walkways amid a complex of massive structures in the middle of downtown. What these projects had in common is a sense of the city as somehow centered, which has been, perhaps, L.A.'s most abiding issue all along.

Nowhere does this resonate more fully than in the Maguire Partners' 1979-80 proposal for Grand Avenue, "a $700-million architectural exquisite corpse" made up of nine individual projects, designed by, among others, Frank Gehry, Lawrence Halprin and Charles Moore, that "would have connected upper Grand Avenue to the city's historic core through a series of intersecting parks, plazas, fountains, and promenades, an outdoor theater, and a variety of pavilions for restaurants and cafes."

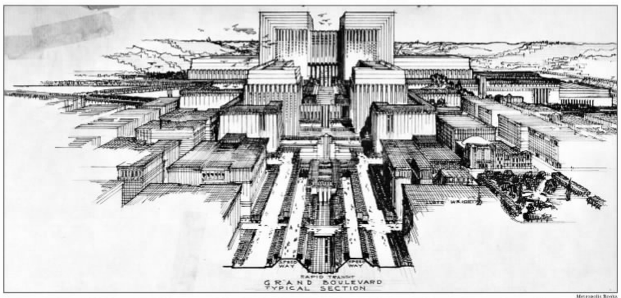
As compelling as this sounds, Goldin and Lubell never let us forget the converse: that for every dream, there's a monstrosity. One of my favorites is an offshore freeway called the Causeway, which would have run along a six-mile chain of artificial islands between Santa Monica and Malibu had Gov. Edmund G. Brown not vetoed it in 1965. Another is Donald Trump's plan for a 148-story gold skyscraper on the Ambassador Hotel site, which he acquired in 1989. Ultimately, LAUSD took over the Ambassador after a 12-year legal battle.

And yet, despite his New York arrogance (build the world's tallest building on Wilshire and Alexandria?), is Trump really so different from the tycoons who built Los Angeles?

"There's space here," Goldin and Lubell argue, "for ... reckless self-invention," which, in many ways, is what "Never Built Los Angeles" is about.

"In the end," they continue, "cities are never complete, even when they perish. Ghosts of cities past inhabit the ruins and affect us across the ages. Crumbling Mayan temples made converts of Robert Stacy-Judd and Frank Lloyd Wright. The frayed and faded notions of countless others who have sketched and doodled may, in turn, stir new generations to toy with the boundaries of artistic and urban expression and to rethink a place that, to this day, is trying to solve the riddle of what it wants to become."

david.ulin@latimes.com




Metropolis Books

**LLOYD WRIGHT'S** Civic Center plan of 1925, an "acropolis for the city" with terraced walkways amid a complex of massive structures in the middle of downtown.

# Ad man meets witch in joyful caper novel

BY CAROLYN KELLOGG

**Babayaga**
A novel
Toby Barlow
Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 400 pp., $27

Before "Babayaga," I thought Disney had captured all the world's folk tales and remade them as child-friendly blockbusters. But author Toby Barlow got to Baba Yaga — fearsome witches plucked from old Russian legend — first, and he brings them to life in 1950s Paris.

At the center of the novel is Will, a young American ad man who is not a witch. He's enjoying the pleasures of the city, although he'll probably soon be heading home to Detroit. He's a likable, drifting twentysomething, the kind of guy who might meet a fellow expat in a bar and tag along for an evening of drinking and wooing girls.

Enter Zoya, whom Will pursues avidly — thanks in part to her spells, woven because she likes him too. Dark-haired, blue-eyed and big-bosomed, Zoya is with an older lover in the book's first pages, post-coital, worried that he's finally noticed she hasn't aged in decades. She looks sweet, but she's innately dangerous: She swiftly dispenses with the old man by impaling his head on a spike.

She learned everything she knows from Elga, an ancient, evil crone. With an apartment crammed with potions, a black rat for a familiar and a decidedly nasty disposition, Elga is a witch in the classic mode. Just to keep things interesting, she's got a modern touch or two: For a jolt of energy, she snorts dried, powdered snake.

When Zoya's indiscretely disposed lover leads a police detective named Vidot to Elga's door, the elder witch flies into a fury and turns him into a flea. Yes, a flea.

As with any good farce, the plot isn't really the point, but it can best be described as a tangle of pursuits. Elga seeks revenge on Zoya, the police try to find Vidot, Vidot wants to be human again, and enchanted Will and Zoya chase each other. Meanwhile, Will's expat friend Oliver (the one he went drinking with) runs a literary journal by day and is a CIA operative by night; he soon sweeps Will up in his Cold War shenanigans.

Linda Hamlin Farrar, Straus and Giroux

**TOBY BARLOW**

All of this could be a hot mess, but Barlow is adept at combining unexpected genres: His first novel, "Sharp Teeth," was about werewolves in Los Angeles, told entirely in verse. On his second time out as a novelist, Barlow easily keeps all the balls in the air (while balancing on stilts and whistling a happy tune). The blend of James Bond, folk tale, Gogol's humor and surrealism with a corny French detective and a young man's love story all improbably works.

The voice of this book is straightforward, light and warm. Stuck on a stuffy subway, Will "distracted himself by recalling the night he met Zoya on the metro. He remembered her little smudge of a black eye, how surprising it had been when she spoke to him and how he'd thought about asking her out for a drink but hadn't, because he'd been too tired. He suspected that would be the scene he took home with him as his mental postcard of Paris, a vision of talking with a pretty girl alone at night on an empty train." And where Will is full of feeling, the police detective Vidot can't help be funny: He's upstanding, valiant, proud, slightly pretentious — while being a flea.

Barlow goes all-in on each story line: Poor Vidot hitches his way across the city on the bellies of dogs, an adventure relayed with great physical detail. Will and Oliver try to deliver the CIA goods amid a baffling scrim of double crosses that tap dances among a mysterious pharmacy, a jazz trio, a pair of Russian assassins and a blond American WASP. Will and Zoya connect, explicitly; the book isn't coy about sex. The witches' history unfolds richly too.

To propel things along, the ghosts of three witches, old colleagues of Elga and Zoya's, comment on the events like a Greek chorus. In verse, of course.

Writing these free-form poems, some of which go on for pages, is something an author undertakes only if it's fun. A real joy in the storytelling process comes through as well in the whimsical detours and characterizations.

As literary nerds will recognize, Oliver's ridiculous dual life — a government agent who runs a literary journal — is a riff on the Paris Review. One co-founder, Peter Mattheissen, was actually in the CIA. Another, the writer George Plimpton, served as the model for the charismatic spy with an endless supply of anecdotes.

When Barlow began writing fiction, he has said, he was "blessed by Plimpton's spirit of making the impossible possible." This book continues in that tradition: It's an absurd hybrid that winds up as a bewitching caper novel.

carolyn.kellogg@latimes.com

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